

## Altmire Joins Call for Investigation of Pittsburgh VA's Handling of Veterans' Benefits Claims

(WASHINGTON, D.C.) -- Today, U.S. Congressmen Tim Murphy (PA-18), Jason Altmire (PA-04), and Mike Doyle (PA-14), along with Senators Arlen Specter (D-PA) and Bob Casey (D-PA) sent a letter to the Government Accountability Office (GAO) requesting an investigation into the VA Regional Office in Pittsburgh's handling of veterans' benefits claims.

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A report released by the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General (VA OIG) in May 2009 found that due to a delay in the processing of veterans' benefit claims, the Pittsburgh VA's performance numbers were artificially inflated and employees received a \$300 bonus. Local Congressional leaders are asking the GAO to further investigate this mishandling of veterans claims and to report on how the processing of veterans' claims can be improved in the future.

A copy of the letter is pasted below.

"The Department of Veterans Affairs' investigation into the processing of veterans' benefits claims at the Pittsburgh VA can be described as incomplete at best," Congressman Altmire said. "We need to get to the bottom of this issue so we can determine what steps need to be taken to ensure that veterans' claims are processed as quickly and as efficiently as possible. It is simply unacceptable that veterans who put their lives on the line to protect their country are being forced to wait for months to receive the benefits that they have earned."

"Today, we are calling on the Government Accountability Office to fully review and report to Congress on the allegations of benefits being withheld from our local veterans. More importantly, we look forward to the GAO's recommendations on improving VA service so that this situation can't and won't happen again. We are focused on positive solutions to ensure the Pittsburgh VA delivers timely first-class service that our veterans deserve," said Congressman Murphy.

"It's a disgrace that many veterans and their families have to wait so long to receive the benefits they deserve," Congressman Doyle said. "We need to make sure that this problem has been fixed and that any misconduct has been addressed. That's why we've asked the GAO to fully investigate this matter."

“It is my hope that the GAO will thoroughly investigate the Pittsburgh VA’s benefit claims processing system so we can better serve the veterans that have served our country,” Senator Specter said. “Veterans claims should be processed in a timely, efficient manner, and we should do everything we can to improve the system.”

“Situations like this undermine the credibility of our government and a thorough investigation is necessary,” said Senator Casey. “Integrity checks should not be needed to ensure that our veterans are treated fairly and their claims handled promptly. I will continue to work with my colleagues in the Pennsylvania delegation to advocate for Pennsylvania veterans who face delays and unjust treatment.”

Text of letter below:

We write to request a thorough investigation into recent incidents in Pittsburgh related to employee incentives in the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). Specifically, we were outraged to learn that VBA employees in Pittsburgh may have improperly delayed payments to veterans in order to qualify for performance bonuses.

As documented in a May 12, 2009 VA OIG report, the VBA designed a financial incentive program that rewarded employees for rating each claim within seven days during April and May 2008. Because of the way the claims system is designed, by delaying the movement of the claim into the ready-for-rating batch, performance numbers could be made to look better than they actually were. The result was the delay in payment to deserving veterans and the awarding of \$300 bonuses to Pittsburgh employees.

Congress has allocated money for new software and additional VBA staff yet the backlog grows even larger, delaying the timely payment of benefits to deserving veteran families. In Pittsburgh alone, there are approximately 4,850 pending claims, more than 27 percent of which are over 180 days old. Out of 56 locations nationwide, Pittsburgh has the fifth-highest percentage of claims pending over 180 days.

The aforementioned May 12, 2009 VA OIG report characterized the delayed processing as a misunderstanding between management and staff, and “did not substantiate the allegation” that misconduct had taken place. This raises questions and we seek information to ensure that proper practices are put in place for the future. When misconduct such as this is alleged, full resolution through investigation is necessary to restore the confidence of veterans, every one of whom deserves the prompt and accurate adjudication of benefits claims.

The Government Accountability Office has already documented the VA delays and associated problems with employee training and management. When it comes to fixing a broken system, the recommendations made in the VA OIG report are wholly inadequate.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to your response.